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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF PLANNING ALI BABAN RETURNS TO GOI,  
SEPARATES FROM TAWAFUQ

REF: 2006 BAGHDAD 1972

BAGHDAD 00003201 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Minister of Planning Ali Baban told PolCouns and PolOffs on September 19 he is an "independent" and no longer part of the Tawafuq bloc because it "lacks vision." He believes the resignation of the Tawafuq ministers is paralyzing the GOI at a time when Iraq needs a strong central government free of religious ideology and sectarianism. He is supportive of PM Maliki, who accepted him back into his ministerial position, but cited the lack of efficiency and long-term vision in the GOI as major obstacles. He does not support his ministry conducting a census at this time as a way to decide the Article 140 issues. He has a "hands off" approach to involvement in the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) and donor issues, leaving most of the work to his staff. He is not engaged with the International Compact process and favors instead a national strategy/compact focus. End summary.

BABAN PULLS OUT OF TAWAFUQ

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¶2. (C) Minister of Planning Ali Baban told PolCouns and PolOffs on September 19 that he had decided to pull out of the Iraq Islamic Party (IIP) and Tawafuq bloc. (Note: Baban announced his initial return to the GOI the week of September 11, but did not clarify his long-term intentions to his staff until September 18. End note). He noted that "Tawafuq has no vision," and that its pullout will just speed up the collapse of the country. He stressed the GOI is now paralyzed as a result of the withdrawal of the Tawafuq bloc. He said he tried to get IIP to stay in the GOI in early August, but was unsuccessful. He said he will now "work as an independent with no affiliation to any party." He said he may establish a new political group in the future, but has no immediate plans.

IRAQIS WANT NATIONALISM, NOT RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY

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¶3. (C) Baban thinks religious ideology and influence is playing a detrimental role in Iraq and causing more sectarianism. "(This) has caused the leadership to fail," said Baban. Baban added that he enjoys positive relations with PM Maliki, who appreciated his decision to leave Tawafuq and focus on public service. He defended Maliki several times during the discussion, stating: "PM Maliki is the first in the world to face such large obstacles and challenges." He emphasized Iraqis want new leadership without sectarianism, only nationalism. Iraqis resent religious interference and Iran's growing influence in the country. He

stressed the need for a strong central government during this time of crisis.

GOI NEEDS FIXING

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¶4. (C) Minister Baban emphasized that the Iraqi people are not satisfied with the government right now. He pointed to a lack of efficiency and long-term strategy and vision as key problems within the GOI. He noted the Ministry of Planning is responsible for finding programs and projects, but criticized the lack of coordination within the GOI to implement projects as a big impediment. He highlighted passage of the provincial powers and hydrocarbon laws as essential to Iraq's economy.

NO SUPPORT FOR CENSUS

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¶5. (C) When asked whether his ministry plans to conduct a census of the population in Kirkuk, an important part of the Article 140 process, Baban said he recommended to the cabinet that plans for a census be suspended. He added the Kurdish leadership is making it difficult to implement the census right now. He believes Article 140 is not suitable for resolving the dispute over Kirkuk. He said "even as a Kurd" he believes this issue should be dealt with in a different manner that would take into account majority opinion.

IRRFI AND INTERNATIONAL COMPACT

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¶6. (C) When asked by PolCouns whether he planned to attend the next IRRFI Meeting in Bari, Italy on October 28-29, Minister Baban responded he would send his staff or deputy. Baban said he would like to see a national compact or strategy before an International Compact for Iraq (ICI).

BAGHDAD 00003201 002.2 OF 002

(Note: Baban's comments reflected the lack of his involvement or interest in the International Compact launch in Sharm el-Sheikh in May 2007. Post has observed friction between DPM Saleh and Baban on the International Compact. End note). He added, "we cannot submit any commitment to other countries if we are failing on our commitments in this country." He stressed the fact that Iraq has no agreement on priorities for Iraq's future, clearly stating that Iraq's priority "is not an International Compact."

INNER WORKINGS OF THE MINISTRY

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¶7. (S/NF) While Baban is the Minister of Planning, it is well known within the GOI and among foreign donors that Dr. Faik Rasool, Baban's former deputy and current special advisor, keeps the ministry running. Faik Rasool reached the age of mandatory retirement during the past year and so could not retain his official status as deputy, but continues in the ministry in a similar role. He previously served as DPM Barham Saleh's Chief of Staff when Saleh was Minister of Planning. Baban is rumored to be in the process of hiring an "official" new deputy.

BIO NOTE

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¶8. (S/NF) Ali Baban is a Sunni-Kurd. He has lived his entire life in Baghdad and rarely mentions his Kurdish roots. His family resides in Amman as well as the United Kingdom. He has health issues (asthmatic and diabetic). Baban's background is the financial markets sector. He speaks English well, although sometimes he likes to express technical points in Arabic. There are rumors that Baban met with the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq in February 2007. There are also suspicions that Ali Baban may have been paid off by Kurdish telecom company Korek to help them compete for and

win a telecom tender. An IIP senior staff member told PolOffs that Ali Baban is under investigation by the Commission of Public Integrity (CPI) for his participation in the telecom deal. Baban was clearly a political party pick in May 2006 and his responses to questions still reflect his lack of knowledge of recent events or issues involving his ministry (reftel).

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